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TREASURE, LITTLE PLEASURE **FOLKLORE AS RELIC**

„Everybody's looking for a reason to live
If you're looking for a reason
I've a reason to give
Pleasure, little treasure”
(Depeche Mode: *Pleasure, Little Treasure*)

Montaigne writes in his essay on experience: “I have a special vocabulary of my own; I »pass away time,« when it is ill and uneasy, but when 'tis good I do not pass it away: »I *taste it* over again and adhere to it«” (italics mine).¹ This attitude to time (*taste it*) is quite important in the history of Hungarian folklore studies: their mechanism can be observed in almost every aspect of the discourse on folklore. The development of the discipline itself is connected to the aspect of clutching to time, to the need for collection, formulated in the classic call from 1782 of the *Magyar Hirmondó* expressing the preference for collection: following the foreign (especially French, English and German) effects Miklós Révai urged the collection and publication of Hungarian folklore products.

The metaphoric denomination of folklore is very common in the writings from the 19th century in treating (or referring to) the relationship between folklore and literature and sustaining the importance of folklore. The most important tropes designating folklore in this period are *spark*,² *spring*,³ *treasure*⁴ and *relic*.

¹ Michel de Montaigne, “Of experience,” Charles Cotton trans., in William Carew Hazlitt ed., *The Essays of Montaigne, Complete*, available:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/3600/3600-h/3600-h.htm#2HCH0106>, access: 23 March 2006.

In the French text: “J’ay un dictionnaire tout à part moy: je passe le temps, quand il est mauvais et incommode; quand il est bon, je ne le veux pas passer, je le retaste, je m’y tiens”. Michel de Montaigne, “De l’expérience,” in Alexandre Micha ed., *Essais. Livre III*. (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 1979), 323.

² Cf. Ferenc Kölcsey, “Nemzeti hagyományok,” in Ferenc Kulin ed., *Nemzet és sokaság. Kölcsey Ferenc válogatott tanulmányai* (Budapest: Múzsák, 1988), 60.; In accordance with Kölcsey Arany uses it too: János Arany, “A magyar népdal az irodalomban,” in Pál S. Varga ed., *Tanulmányok és kritikák* (Debrecen: Kossuth Egyetemi Kiadó, 1998), 85.

The essay of Róbert Milbacher⁵—the first chapter of which is on the folk idiom of literature—examines in detail the 19th century approaches to the relationship between folklore and poetry. Milbacher too emphasises that the folklore is represented in the works of that period as a source or mine to exploit, needs *improvement, pruning, polishing, refining*. However, beside the common features there are differences too in the perception of folklore by different groups. These differences were examined mainly by János H. Korompay in his study entitled *Kritikatörténet, népköltészet és népiesség* (*History of Criticism, folklore and popular trends*). Korompay distinguishes four standpoints: (1) the two areas are in a hierarchic opposition, where folklore is inferior; therefore the delimitation between literature and folklore is striking and allows no passing (the circle of Ferenc Császár, Honderű); (2) the relationship between literature and folklore is hierarchic, but they are not strikingly delimited (Bajza, Toldy). (3) Some sustained their equality (late works of Erdélyi, Arany, Petőfi); (4) and there were authors who thought that folklore was perfect (Pulszky, early Erdélyi, Pesti Divatlap—Fashion Magazine of Pest—and its circle).⁶

The opposition—namely between hierarchy/equality—defining even today the folkloristic thinking on the status of folklore is present in the 19th century notion already. The research on the relationship between these two corpuses is structured by a second opposition between one-sidedness and reciprocity. According to the sustainers of the one-sidedness the passing between literature and folklore is *one-sided* (meaning that only literature has the right and possibility to access folklore), while the second group thinks that the relation between the two areas is mutual, meaning that the folklore *derives, borrows, takes over* from the literature, as this one does from folklore. Of course, it is obvious that all approaches (no matter on which side they were) served different purposes in the narrative of folkloristics. In the above sketched early stage of folkloristics, as a discipline both the outline of equality and the emphasis on difference supported the legitimization and identification efforts of the discipline taking shape

³ Cf. János Erdélyi, "[Felterjesztés]," in Ilona T. Erdélyi ed., *Nyelvészeti és népköltészeti, népzenei írások* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1991), 224.; Pál Gyulai, "Magyar népmesék," in idem *Bírálatok 1861–1903*. (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1912), 16, 17.

⁴ János Erdélyi, "Előszó [Népdalok és Mondák, I. kötet]," in Ilona T. Erdélyi ed., 231.; Pál Gyulai, "Adalék népköltészetünkhöz," in idem *Kritikai dolgozatok 1854–1861*. (Budapest: Franklin-Társulat, 1908), 308.

⁵ Róbert Milbacher, "A lilium és a mocsármövények (Az irodalmi népiesség mint akkulturációs folyamat)," in idem *„...földben állasz mély gyökökkel...” A magyar irodalmi népiesség genezisének akkulturációs módszere és pórias hagyományának vázlatja* (Budapest: Osiris, 2000), 25–59.

⁶ János H. Korompay, "Kritikatörténet, népköltészet és népiesség," *Holmi* 11 (1995): 1620–1628.

just in those times. The persistency of the spring metaphor (and the above mentioned similar synecdoche-like metaphors) also meant that the folklore–literature relation (from the aspect of one-sidedness and reciprocity) was still perceived as one-sided.

Since the call published in *Magyar Hirmondó* the importance of collecting folklore products and the fact that this could not be postponed have been stressed in many forms. The repeated urging can be observed in the 19th century discourse as well as in folklore studies of the 20th century, thus the constraint of collecting manifested in folklore in different forms, but with the same strength. I would mention just two important authors with reference to the problem of being in the 24th hour:

One can observe mainly in these times of changing and decisive transforming of the peasant culture, that where the relevance of popular beliefs is decreasing or ceasing, [...] the practice of its transmission is fading and weakening too.⁷

I quoted the words of Ortutay from the introduction to the tales of Mihály Fedics published by him in 1978; they represent metonymically the need of the folklorist for collecting. Linda Dégh, the disciple of Ortutay formulates this even more expressively with reference to the collection of tales:

We should collect much more now, that the change of rural life abolishes the events of telling tales before our very eyes, for all that the Hungarian catalogue of folktales (which is in making) finally should ensure a real image of the rich treasure of hungarian folktales compared to that shamefully slight collection which has been gathered yet.⁸

At the same time fear of missing the opportunity, the assault of the 24th hour is not a neurosis of the Hungarian folkloristics alone. George E. Marcus defines two frequent ethnographer position in the first, long note to *Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System* published in *Writing Culture*: one is the *salvage* mode, and the other is the *redemptive* mode.⁹

⁷ Gyula Ortutay, *Fedics Mihály mesél* (Budapest: Akadémiai, 1978), 71.

⁸ Linda Dégh, "Az egyéniségvizsgálat perspektívái," *Ethnographia* 1960: 30.

⁹ „The two most common modes for self-consciously fixing ethnography in historic time are what I shall call the *salvage* mode and the *redemptive* mode.” (italics mine) George E. Marcus, "Contemporary Problems of Ethnography in the Modern World System," in James Clifford and George E. Marcus ed., *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley–Los Angeles–London: University of California Press, 1986), 165.



According to Marcus the researcher, on the one hand, positions himself as a rescuer and presents himself as “before the deluge”, moreover, he believes, on the other hand, that he would be able to salvage a *changing* cultural condition being just before a deluge. This rhetorical strategy results in the fact that the researcher generations following each other attach the same importance to their role. In the case of the redemptive mode (which is almost the same) the researcher diagnoses the survival of cultural conditions despite significant changes, so he regards a culture in its *continuity* despite all changes. This problem of continuity deeply influences folklore studies, as permanence and change (or tradition and novelty,¹⁰ if you like) is a definitive opposition in ethnography. Apart from these connotations the way how Marcus uses the terms sets in motion the sacral metaphor too, which defined—from the beginning of folklore—the idea of 24th hour that has repeatedly been occurring in its discourse, and the pressure of collection arising from this idea.

The famous volume of Thomas Percy, the *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765) can—due to the formulation of the title (*reliques*)—be considered the overture to this sacral relationship. Among the theorists of the 19th century of Hungarian folklore mainly the works of János Erdélyi show the salvage and redemptive mode presented by Marcus. Erdélyi uses strikingly frequently a certain metaphor for denominating folklore; it is characteristic for his writings to use and let flow metaphors abundantly, therefore it is possible that some remain unnoticed by the critics. However, some metaphors are repeated so persistently that it is no longer possible to ignore them. One of these metaphors is (as mentioned before): *folklore as relic*. He introduces it in his study entitled *Népköltészetéről* (*On Folklore*) dated 1842 already:

If some words have such a great capacity to retain the attention of scientists, how much more could earn the national self-knowledge thanks to the *relics of folklore* (italics mine)¹¹

and it is a frequent trope in his late writings between 1850 and 1860.¹² The relic metaphor appears in a writing of József Bajza from 1846 extended to language:

¹⁰ In Hungarian the word for tradition (‘hagyomány’) also means ‘heritage, share’.

¹¹ János Erdélyi, “Népköltészetéről,” in Ilona T. Erdélyi ed., 108. [„Ha egyes szavak is ennyire bírják a tudósok figyelmét, mennyivel többet nyer a nemzeti önismeret a népköltészet ereklyéiben”]

¹² Cf. “népköltészeti ereklyék” (folklore relics) (János Erdélyi, “Népköltészetünk a külföldön,” in Ilona T. Erdélyi ed., 250.; “a magyar népirodalom ereklyéi” (relics of the Hungarian folklore [folk-literature]) (János Erdélyi, “Előszó [Magyar Népmesék],” in Ilona T. Erdélyi ed., 258.

“Yet people do not have more saint *relic* and more protected *treasure*, than their language and truly written history” (italics mine).¹³ The rhetorical analysis of Erdélyi’s use of metaphors gives reason for treating more in extent the functioning of the cult of saints and relics. “It is well-known that the cult of relics doesn’t shrink back from anything, yet the demand for authenticity is not indispensable for it (that is why there are so many copies).”¹⁴ – says in a marginal remark Ernő Marosi in one of his studies. We could add to this remark that it is also well-known that the cult of relics doesn’t shrink back from anything to such a degree, that the cultic perception of objects interprets the umpteenth piece of wood as a remain from the crucifix of Christ precisely as a result of unconditioned belief in authenticity. This cult is so reckless that relics as tools of power were sold, even stolen, if needed. They tried to put under erasure the paradox feature of stealing relics by creating a specific type of medieval legend justifying it, the *furta sacra*.¹⁵ And the cult of relics is so hard to scare that according to medieval legal practice (as Gábor Klaniczay writes) touching the relic meant the authentication of the oath¹⁶ (alike later the Bible). Beside the fact that the cult of saints and relics as a narrative sets in motion several oppositions (saint/profane, life/death, clean/unclean etc.), its tropological connections are also interesting.

As the fetish object is connected to the terms of power, memory, rescue and substitute in the writings of Freud on the fetish and its function, the meaning of the fetish used in religious context before Freud also makes use of the same terms. The *fetish* in its religious (and ethnographic) sense, namely the objects of tribal communities received a religious respect (stone, wood etc.) and the cultic objects of Christianity (like relics) don’t differ these from a structural point of view. Keeping up continuity is a basic feature of these fetishes and one can prove in both types the *differance*.

The relic is the remaining trace, witness, reminder, sign of a once-present. Considering the bones and parts of the body of saints attracting a religious respect the relic acts as a synecdoche of what it refers to, and the use of the clothes of saints and other objects connected to them as relics can be interpreted

¹³ József Bajza, “Nemzetiség és nyelv,” in idem *Válogatott művei* (Budapest: Szépirodalmi, 1959), 416. [“Azért a népeknek nincs szentebb ereklyéjük és félhetőbb kincsek, mint nyelvök és híven jegyzett történetök.”]

¹⁴ Ernő Marosi, “A magyar középkor művészete a Nemzeti Múzeumban a millicentenáriumi év kiállításain,” *BUKSZ* 2 (1997): 165.

¹⁵ Gábor Klaniczay, “Rex iustus – a keresztény királyság szent megalapítója,” in idem *Az uralkodók szentsége a középkorban. Magyar dinasztikus szentkultuszok és európai modellek* (Budapest: Balassi, 2000), 131.

¹⁶ Gábor Klaniczay, “Szentkultusz a középkori Magyarországon,” in idem *A civilizáció peremén. Kultúrtörténeti tanulmányok* (Budapest: Magvető, 1990), 223.

as a metonymic relation. No matter what kind of relic we are talking about, the relic (as a fetish) is a tie through which the saint, thus the sanctity can always be reached (by touching it directly or at least indirectly). Gábor Klaniczay mentions in his writing on the medieval cult of saints (referred to above), that “The relic was considered to be *identical* with the saint itself, like the wafer and the wine *is identified* with the body and blood of Christ (italics mine).”¹⁷ Thus, according to Klaniczay the relic and the saint are not different for the participants in the cult (that is why they could appeal for help directly to the relic).

As we can see, the topic of complete difference, opposition, and its opposite: the identity has already come in. De Man demonstrates in the functioning of the metaphor the differences that the identity and identification try to hide, the aporetic character of the literal and figural meanings of the metaphor. The resemblance, which is at the basis of tropological play, drives de Man too often to the problem of identity-difference (particularly: opposition): “resemblance is »loved« because it can be interpreted as identity as well as difference and is therefore unseizable, forever in flight.”¹⁸ He notes this in his study, *Self (Pygmalion)*, but similar phrases occur in other de Man texts too. He shows with reference to the *Second Discourse* that the result of the explicit statement of Rousseau, according to which the (proper) noun has a temporal priority against the term, is that Rousseau connects the tropological (metaphoric) function to conceptualization,¹⁹ though the replacement, the displacement can be shown out in the act of naming itself too – that is what de Man does.²⁰ De Man outlines the feature of displacement that the displacement characteristic to all tropes is realised provided that the two things basically differ:

The crossing of sensory attributes in synaesthesia is only a special case of a more general pattern of substitution that all tropes have in common. It is the result of an exchange of properties made possible by a proximity or an analogy so close and intimate that it allows the

¹⁷ Ibid. 221.

¹⁸ Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading. Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1979), 168.

¹⁹ Cf. „The text yields information on this point, though not in a simple and straight forward way. It describes conceptualization as substituting one verbal utterance (at the simplest level, a common noun) for another on the basis of a resemblance that hides differences which permitted the existence of entities in the first place.” Ibid. 144–145.

²⁰ Cf. „But if all entities are the same, namely entities, to the extent that they differ from each other, then the substitution of sameness for difference that characterizes, for Rousseau, all conceptual language is built into the very act of naming, the »invention« of the proper noun.” Ibid. 148.

one to substitute for the other without revealing the difference necessarily introduced by the substitution.²¹

This short but necessary digression becomes important in the understanding of the relic metaphor, as we will soon see. It is trivial that different cultures have a cultic respect for different (or similar) signs. Through the transfiguration of the object, the hierophany, a basically profane object becomes something totally other than it was (saint), and yet it remains an object. Thus, the sacred, the divine can be manifested, embodied only through its opposite, the profane; the appearance of the sacred always repeats the above mentioned functioning of the metaphoric displacement. The cult of saints and relics thus represents a narrative, where the act of embodiment can be interpreted as the fulfilment of a metaphoric displacement, through which the relics of saints attached metonymically to them become metaphoric too. Not forgetting that the metaphor hides its metonymic character through identification,²² the cult of saints is seen as a narrative setting in motion a series of metonymies.

The expression 'relics of folklore' refers to the term *relics of saints*, and lets us conclude that relics here mean the contemporary remains of the one-time, old folklore, so the term 'relics of folklore' refers in the writings of Erdélyi. Thanks to the relic metaphor it becomes clear that as the relic establish a connection to the body of the saint, and through this to the sacred, by means of the collection and touch of the contemporary remains of folklore one can establish a connection to the old folklore, and through this to a sacred signified, which can be equivalent with the sacred according to the narrative of the cult of saints and relics. Besides the above quotation many parts of texts indicate that Erdélyi finds it possible to reach a sacred and final signified through the research of folklore. He calls the songs preserved through the oral tradition "a saint heritage",²³ but we can understand his demand too, that we should accept all products of the folk-language as "the divine manifestation of the folk's spirit".²⁴ He emphasises that "the vocation, noble duty of today's poets is to learn about *people, the life*, to step into the sea, like Jesus, when receiving the grace of the spirit in the Jordan. [emphasis in original]".²⁵

²¹ Ibid. 62.

²² Cf. „The relationship between the literal and figural senses of metaphor is always, in this sense, metonymic, though motivated by a constitutive tendency to pretend the opposite.” Ibid. 71.

²³ János Erdélyi, "Népköltészetéről," in Ilona T. Erdélyi ed., 101.

²⁴ Ibid. 103.

²⁵ Ibid. 109.

The metaphoric and metonymic net around the saint and relic cult covers exactly the notion of folklore that can be discovered in the narratives of Erdélyi's studies on folklore, and the structure of the old-popular relation. The metaphor of Erdélyi is important because it allows us to examine the relationship between two apparently distant narratives, and through this analysis it can be proved that one narrative models, narrates metaphorically the other, and the topological structure of the two narratives can be compared with each other.

The fact that the *recollection* (or 'treasure up'), the *testimonial* and the *supplement* are connected in such a way in the *fetish*, in the *relic* (as fetish), and are connected in János Erdélyi's writings to *folklore*, lets us conclude that the relic should not be understood alone as the contemporary remains of the former, old folklore, through which a sacred signified can be tasted (by the participants). Furthermore, it is true, on the one hand that the functioning of the fetish, the narrative of the saint and relic cult model the attitude towards folklore. On the other hand, that if testimony is required only when doubt arises, and if this signified postulated as the final one (as we can read at Bajza: the language) can be reached always only in its remains and supplements (as a result of the supplementary logic), then it is easier to understand why the endless repetition of the importance of the collection of these supplements, fetishes becomes in most of the folkloristics studies an urgent task, and why the change, vanishing and the continuous postponement is so fearful in folklore studies.

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